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C O N F I D E N T I A L BUENOS AIRES 001148

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/19/2029

TAGS: PGOV KPAO ASEC PHUM SOCI KDEM AR

SUBJECT: ARGENTINA: AMBASSADOR ENCOUNTERS PROTESTERS IN MENDOZA; PUBLIC AND (EVENTUALLY) GOVERNMENT SUPPORT HER

REF: (A) BUENOS AIRES 1084 (B) BUENOS AIRES 0526

Classified By: DCM Tom Kelly for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: During her first trip outside of Buenos Aires, Ambassador Martinez was forced to change the location of a speech at the National University of Cuyo due to disorderly protests by far-left groups on October 15. Public reaction has been mostly sympathetic to the Ambassador and critical of the protesters, and the Ambassador's subsequent statements were well-received. The government took a few days to comment publicly on the incident, but the GOA Chief of Cabinet eventually denounced it on drive-time radio programs on October 19. President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner (CFK), receiving the Ambassador's credentials later that day, said "there is intolerance everywhere," which the media interpreted as a sign of support for the Ambassador.
End Summary.

Ambushed by Student Protesters

¶2. (SBU) On October 15, Ambassador Martinez, accompanied by a control officer, press assistant, and two bodyguards, traveled to the National University of Cuyo in Mendoza to meet with administrators and deliver a speech on foreign policy. The visit was one of many events planned for the Ambassador's first trip outside of Buenos Aires. The university hosts a number of U.S. college students studying abroad, has worked well with Embassy Buenos Aires in the past on exchange programs, and has expressed a strong interest in deepening cooperation with the Embassy and with U.S. universities. After arriving at the university, the Ambassador met with Vice Rector Kent and Institutional Relations Coordinator Abihaggle, as well as representatives from each of the university's schools. During the meeting, Vice Rector Kent mentioned to the Ambassador that there were a few members of a leftist student organization planning on protesting her speech. He added that he did not think there were more than five or six protestors and that while they might make some noise, they would not cause a significant problem. After hearing about this potential disruption, the Ambassador responded that with fourteen years of experience as a member of the Board of Regents for the University of California system, she was accustomed to such disruptions. All of the participants in the meeting then proceeded to the medical faculty where the speech was to be held.

¶3. (SBU) The Ambassador entered the lecture hall, which was filled with approximately 70 attendees, all of whom were sitting quietly in their seats. A university administrator made a few opening remarks and then passed the microphone to Vice Rector Kent. Once Vice Rector Kent began to introduce the Ambassador, more than half the attendees stood up, began to sing and displayed large banners denouncing U.S. actions

in Honduras, Colombia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The protestors criticized the Embassy's involvement in the labor dispute between unions and Kraft Foods (ref a). The Ambassador waited in the hope that the protest would die down, but after approximately eight to ten minutes of continued yelling, singing, and drum-banging by the protestors, she decided that it was unlikely the protestors would allow her to deliver her speech. The university administrators, bodyguards and the Ambassador's party then moved to another room within the same building. (One of the protestors threw an orange at the departing Embassy group that thankfully missed its target.) Local police and the Ambassador's bodyguards then screened those interested in listening to her speech in the separate location, first at the entrance to hall where the room was located and then at the door of the room itself. She then delivered her speech and took questions from the audience without incident.

Media and Public Sympathy for the Ambassador

¶4. (U) The incident has been widely reported and commented on in the Argentine media. Ambassadorial activity in the provinces rarely makes national news, but in this case reports of the protest reached the national level, including the top circulation dailies, "Clarín" and "La Nación." Clips of the protest were aired on national TV and radio, prompting commentary during the weekend. Pundits tied the incident to the violent attack in remote, northern Jujuy province a day later on the head of the opposition Radical Party, Senator Gerardo Morales, who was assaulted and heckled by a group of pro-government picketers. Columnists Joaquín Morales Sola in La Nación and Fernando González in El Cronista Comercial said

that the two episodes reflected increasing political intolerance fueled from the top down in Argentine society. La Nación ran a photo of the protest next to a front-page editorial on the decline of standards of courtesy and public discourse, though the editorial said nothing about the incident as it focused on the obscene anti-media tirade by Argentina's national team soccer coach Diego Maradona.

¶5. (U) All the articles and TV and radio reports made a point of showing or describing how the Ambassador endured the heckling and waited patiently and calmly to speak as the protest was happening. Her comment afterwards that "I listened to them, but unfortunately they did not want to listen to me" was highlighted in most of the stories. National daily "Clarín" and Mendoza daily "Los Andes" followed up with reports on the Ambassador's breakfast talk to Mendoza leaders the next day. Both chose to quote her comment that "we all need to work together against intolerance." In the blogosphere, comments posted on media websites and on the Embassy's Facebook page strongly criticized the demonstrators and expressed sympathy toward the Ambassador. The few exceptions were posted in the name of leftist organizations, focused on solidarity with the workers at Kraft and sought to link the Ambassador's legal work for U.S. corporations with union-busting.

Putting the University on Notice

¶6. (SBU) Shortly after the event concluded, CAO spoke by phone to Vice Rector Kent and conveyed Embassy's disappointment that security failed. Kent expressed regret about the "uncomfortable incident" and lamented that among the university's 40,000 students, there were inevitably a small number with leftist views, intolerant attitudes, and ties to extremist parties, and that it was impossible to completely screen them out. However, he acknowledged that the university's security arrangements were inadequate. Kent sought to emphasize that the protestors' opinions were in no way representative of the university or of the vast majority of its students, and noted that the Ambassador was ultimately able to give her speech. CAO replied that nonetheless, the very awkward incident would make it difficult to deepen Embassy cooperation with the University, which the

university's rector had emphasized as one of his goals.

Government Conveys Solidarity, Eventually

¶7. (SBU) The incident took place while President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner (CFK) and Foreign Minister Jorge Taiana were on a state visit to India, and perhaps reflecting their absence, the government hesitated to comment publicly on the case. Taiana's chief of staff called the DCM a few hours after the incident to register the Foreign Ministry's "solidarity" with the Ambassador; news of the call was promptly reported by the government wire service TELAM. Argentine Ambassador to the United States Hector Timerman called the Ambassador to express his sympathy.

¶8. (C) On Monday, October 19, four days after the incident, Cabinet Chief Anibal Fernandez publicly commented on it. Labeling it "embarrassing" and criticizing the protestors' "Nazi methods," Fernandez said "these kinds of things shouldn't happen. He also claimed (falsely) that he had called the Ambassador over the previous weekend to express his sentiments personally.

¶9. (SBU) Later that same day, as she received the Ambassador's credentials, CFK told the Ambassador "there is intolerance everywhere," which the media interpreted as a sign of support for the Ambassador. CFK and the Ambassador chatted amiably for about five minutes. Afterward, in remarks to the press, CFK said she was positively impressed by the Ambassador's distinguished record in civil rights, and she reiterated her view that President Obama's designation of a woman lawyer to be ambassador to Argentina was a "personal gesture" to CFK.

Comment

¶10. (C) Much of the Argentine public was positively impressed by the way which the Ambassador, unfazed, held the high ground, and she struck a chord among many Argentines when she called for working together against intolerance. Many Embassy contacts are appalled and worried by the growing lack of civility in political discourse and the impunity with

which protesters shout down speakers, "piqueteros" block roads and shut down bridges or attack people celebrating Israel's anniversary, workers seize factories, and students occupy schools.

¶11. (C) Under the Kirchner administrations, GOA authorities have been loathe to engage in anything that appears to be repressive of free speech. This reluctance is often attributed to be a reaction to the heavy-handed repression used by the 1976-83 military dictatorship, and also a recognition (stemming from the 2001-02 crisis) that protests can serve to let off steam. This bias may also explain the government's initial reluctance to publicly condemn the aggression against the Ambassador, at least at a high level. Another factor is the government's frequent complicity in mob attacks against political opponents. In the October 16 attack in Jujuy on opposition UCR leader Morales, it was clear that the marauding "piqueteros" receive GOA financing (ref b). In the Mendoza protest of the Ambassador's speech, there is no evidence of a direct link to the Kirchners; some of the protestors also denounced the government. In any event, we also believe it a fairly isolated incident, and we do not intend to let it deter us from keeping up our public diplomacy outreach efforts.

MARTINEZ